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Also original to the room is one of the two Senate bill hoppers on display. It is believed that the piece was used by the Senate during the early 19th century to store and track bills; as a bill advanced through the legislative process it moved up the shelves of the hopper. It is traditionally held that the upper shelves had less space between them because so few bills survived to become law. The original bill hopper is on loan from the Smithsonian Institution.

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The United States Supreme Court then occupied the room from 1860 to 1935. Modifications at that time included removing the circular balcony and vice president’s dais, and installing the Court’s bench and marble busts of the early chief justices. The room was later used for committee meetings and other Senate business. In 1976, when the direction of the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, the Old Senate Chamber was restored to its 1850s appearance. In recent years the Senate has used the chamber for occasional closed-door sessions dealing with highly classified issues of national security. In 1999 senators returned to the chamber for an extraordinary joint party conference to draft procedures for the impeachment trial of President William Jefferson Clinton.

The United States Senate, A.D. 1850 engraved by Robert Whitechurch, 1855 depicts Clay presenting his compromise proposals.
The Old Senate Chamber
1810–1859

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Working drawing for the Senate Chamber by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, October 30, 1809

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Twenty-five years earlier, in 1835, Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which voided the Missouri Compromise and left the question of slavery in Kansas to those settled there. Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, a strong anti-slavery supporter, attacked the bill and personally criticized Douglas, James Mason of Virginia, and Andrew Butler of South Carolina in his famous five-hour speech, “The Crime Against Kansas.”

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Lithograph of caning of Senator Charles Sumner, May 22, 1856

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Working drawing for the Senate Chamber by Benjamin Henry Latrobe. The Senate moved into this chamber in February of 1810, but the setting was short-lived. On August 24, 1814, the British marched on Washington and set fire to the Capitol, leaving the exterior scarred and blackened, the interior gutted, and the Senate chamber destroyed.

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The restored Old Senate Chamber

On the east wall hanging high above the vice president’s dais is a portrait of George Washington, which is among the Senate’s earliest and most significant fine arts acquisitions. American artist Rembrandt Peale created the work in 1823, basing it on his earlier life studies of the former president. The artist hoped it would become the “standard likeness” of the first president, and he framed Washington with a painted stone porthole surrounded by an oak wreath and topped by a keystone bearing the head of Jupiter.

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Below the eagle and the elaborate canopy is the desk of the Vice President of the United States. The Constitution provides that “The Vice-President of the United States shall be President of the Senate...” (Art. I, Sec. 3). This original desk, faced with a red “modesty” curtain, was used by every vice president from George Clinton to John Breckinridge. Also original to the room is one of the two Senate bill hoppers on display. It is believed that the piece was used by the Senate during the early 19th century to store and track bills; as a bill advanced through the legislative process it moved up the shelves of the hopper. It is traditionally held that the upper shelves had less space between them because so few bills survived to become law. The original bill hopper is on loan from the Smithsonian Institution.

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Of the original furniture and decorations in the Old Chamber, several pieces are significant. Among the earliest objects installed in the chamber are two white statuary mantels located on the east wall. These classical mantels were ordered by Benjamin Henry Latrobe about 1812. Before they were shipped, however, the Capitol was destroyed in the fire of 1814. During the rebuilding project, Latrobe learned that the mantelpieces still existed and were available for use in the chamber.

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Suspended above the vice president’s chair is a carved gilded eagle and shield, a symbol of the strength and unity of the young American republic. The piece was planned by Latrobe for the chamber. While the date of the actual installation is unknown, an 1829 guidebook describes the vice president’s chair as “canopied by crimson drapery, richly embossed and held by talons of an o’er hovering eagle.”

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